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ABSTRACT

Hope has been theorized to be a stable cognitive mindset that develops over time, as children experience success at meeting challenges and in conquering obstacles to their goals (Snyder et al, 1994). To determine the effects of children's violence exposure, both as victims and as witnesses, to children's hope, 99 children living in violent areas of a large southeastern city were interviewed individually in their homes. The children were from 8 to 12 years old and represented grades 1 through 8. Ninety-five percent were African American and poor: median income ranged from \$5,000 to \$10,000. Results showed a negative relationship between victimization and hope agency for younger children. As levels of victimization increased, hope decreased. Girls may experience victimization differently than boys because they are victimized by different types of violent events. Girls may also use differing emotional responses to victimization, and they may also use different cognitive processes to understand their victimization experiences. Girls tend to generalize their experiences which can lead to diminished coping strategies. Boys tend to see situations as independent of each other. A positive relationship between victimization and hope agency beliefs was found in older children. Research has yet to determine whether females use emotion-focused coping more because they are more likely to be in uncontrollable situations, and whether males use problem-focused coping more because they are more likely to be in controllable situations. (RJM)

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Impact of Community Violence Exposure on Children's Hope

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Abstract

The present study investigated the effects of community violence exposure (victimization and witnessing) on children's hope. Home interviews were conducted with 99 8 to 12 year old children (99% African-American) living in high violence areas of a large southeastern city. Regression analyses demonstrated that, along with interactions with gender and age, victimization accounted for more of the variance in hope agency beliefs ($R^2 = .20$) than did witnessing ($R^2 = .11$). A significant three-way interaction involving victimization, gender, and age was plotted. Specifically, younger children experienced a decline in hope agency as victimization increased; while for older children, increased victimization led to an increase in hope agency. These effects were stronger for girls than for boys, at both age levels.

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Introduction

Hope has been theorized to be a stable cognitive mindset that develops over time, as children experience success at meeting challenges and in conquering obstacles to their goals (Snyder et al, 1994). It is composed of two factors: pathways and agency. Pathways refer to the child's belief in his/her own ability to generate the paths or strategies necessary to succeed in meeting his/her goals, while agency refers to the child's belief that s/he has the energy and determination to meet his/her goals. A high-hope mindset is produced by past successes, and is characterized by the expectation of future positive experiences.

Many children today, however, are growing up under conditions of chronic community violence. Research has found that children who grow up in violent communities have shorter life expectancies and are likely to experience additional stressful life events that impact their well being (Osofsky, 1995). These stressful violent environments may potentially affect children's ability to produce past successes, and their expectations for future success.

Does hope develop in children growing up under such adverse conditions? Theoretically, Snyder's model suggests that hope would be impaired under conditions where successes were minimized. Research has also suggested that children in violent communities develop a less positive view of the future (Osofsky, 1995); thus, hope would be expected to diminish as violence exposure increased.

The present study examined the effects of children's violence exposure, both as victims and as witnesses, to hope. Gender and age were also examined as possible contributors to and moderators of the violence exposure → hope relationship.

Methods

Ninety-nine children (40 boys, 59 girls) living in moderate to high violent areas of a large southeastern city (as determined by police statistics) were interviewed individually in their homes by trained interviewers, who read all questions and response options to each child from a prepared script. The children were from 8 to 12 years old ($M = 10.7$, $SD = 1.3$), and ranged from first to eighth grades (74.2% were in the fourth to sixth grades). Ninety-five percent were African-American, and poor: median income ranged from \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Children's violence exposure was assessed across 17 different types of violent events, using Richters and Saltzman's (1990) Survey of Exposure to Community Violence (Self-Report Version), which assesses victimization and witnessing events separately. Total violence exposure as indexed by this measure has been correlated with child-rated distress, the Child Depression Inventory, and child-rated fear at school. One-week test-retest reliability has been calculated at .81 (Martinez & Richters, 1993). Higher scores indicated a higher lifetime frequency of community violence exposure.

Snyder et al's (1994) Children's Hope Scale (a 12-item measure) was used to measure children's hope. One-month test-retest reliability has been calculated at $r(359) = .71$, $p < .001$. In a different sample, one-week test-retest reliability was found to be $r(89) = .73$, $p < .001$. Higher scores indicated higher levels of hope.

Results

Preliminary analyses of the pathways subscale of the Children's Hope Scale revealed an internal consistency reliability which was unacceptably low (Cronbach's alpha = .38). Because the internal consistency of the total Hope Scale (Cronbach's alpha = .68) equalled that of the agency subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .68), the pathways subscale was eliminated

from the analyses. All regressions reported here were thus performed predicting the Hope agency subscale only.

Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted separately for victimization and witnessing exposures (see Table 1). Overall, the model for victimization achieved significance ($F(7,81) = 2.91, p < .01$), while the model for witnessing did not ($F(7,91) = 1.53, p > .15$). These overall results suggest that victimization by violence plays a larger role in explaining hope agency beliefs ($R^2 = .20$) than does witnessing community violence ($R^2 = .11$).

A significant three-way interaction between victimization, gender, and age (see Figure 1) demonstrated a negative relationship between victimization and hope agency beliefs for younger children; however, a positive relationship was found for older children. For both younger and older children, the relationship between victimization and hope agency was stronger for girls than for boys.

Discussion

The negative relationship between victimization and hope agency for younger children was as predicted: as levels of victimization increased, hope decreased. There are several possible reasons for the interesting finding that girls were more strongly affected than boys by victimization.

Girls may experience victimization differently than boys because they are victimized by different types of violent events. Singer, Anglin, Song, and Lunghofer (1995) studied 3,735 students in nine inner-city and suburban high schools and found that girls were exposed to significantly more violence within the home than were boys. Being victimized by sexual abuse or assault was also significantly higher for girls than boys, supporting the idea that girls and boys are victimized by differential types of violence.

Girls may experience victimization differently than boys because they experience differing emotional responses to victimization. Singer et al. (1995) found that being female was the single strongest demographic predictor of trauma symptoms and psychological distress (e.g., depression, anger, anxiety, dissociation, and PTSD).

Girls may experience victimization differently than boys because they use different cognitive processes to understand their victimization experiences. Dweck, Goetz, and Strauss (1980) have shown that learned helplessness and failure affects girls differently than boys: girls tend to generalize their failure across situations and to internal causes, while boys tend to see situations as independent of each other and attribute their failures to external causes (Miller & Kirsch, 1987; Dweck et al., 1980). After failure feedback, those with external attributions (mostly boys) worked hard and improved their task performance, while those with internal attributions (mostly girls) tended to give up and were more likely to continue to decline in school performance. It's possible that girls who generalize their failures and attribute them internally may have lowered expectations, which can lead to poorer coping strategies involving less persistence and poorer problem-solving strategies (Dweck et al., 1980; Miller & Kirsch, 1987). Both these deficits may be associated with lower levels of hope on the agency and pathways dimensions, respectively. Perhaps these same processes are at work in integrating victimization experiences in this age group.

Finally, girls may experience victimization differently than boys because of a combination of some or all of these factors. Singer et al. (1995) found that specific psychological symptoms (anxiety, dissociation, stress, depression, and total symptom score) were highly associated with certain types of violence exposure: having been a recent victim or witness of home violence and having been sexually abused or assaulted, both more prevalent among girls.

However, the positive relationship between victimization and hope agency beliefs, found in older children, was completely unexpected. Again, this effect is stronger in girls than in boys. Sex differences in coping strategies may partially explain this non-intuitive finding. Many studies have found sex differences in coping styles in both adults and children, such that males are more likely to use instrumental or problem-focused coping, and females are more likely to use emotion-focused coping (Miller & Kirsch, 1987). Some research has suggested that problem-focused coping strategies are more adaptive in controllable situations, while emotion-focused coping strategies may be more adaptive in uncontrollable situations (Miller & Kirsch, 1987; Kliwer & Sandler, 1992), such as victimization.

Research has yet to determine whether females use emotion-focused coping more *because* they are more likely to be in uncontrollable situations, and whether males use problem-focused coping more *because* they are more likely to be in controllable situations. However, differential exposures to victimization between boys and girls lend support to this hypothesis. The findings reported in the present study, of a positive relationship in older children between victimization and hope agency, may be the result of such coping processes. However, there is no doubt that further research is needed to uncover the mechanism(s) for this rise in hope agency beliefs.

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Table 1

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Hope Agency Beliefs From Victimization and Witnessing

Victimization By Community Violence					Witnessing Community Violence				
Variables Entered	β In	β Final	F cha	R ²	Variables Entered	β In	β Final	F cha	R ²
Step 1			2.97 *	.09	Step 1			2.42 *	.07
Gender	-.11	-.11			Gender	-.01	-.02		
Age	.27	.25			Age	.19 *	.11		
Victimization	-.12	-.16			Witnessing	.15	.26 *		
Step 2			1.64	.15	Step 2			1.08	.10
Victimization x Gender	.09	.09			Witnessing x Gender	-.01	-.17		
Victimization x Age	.20 *	.59 **			Witnessing x Age	-.11	-.15		
Gender x Age	.04	.05			Gender x Age	.25	.15		
Step 3			5.54 *	.20	Step 3			.29	.11
Victimization x Gender x Age		-.47 *			Witnessing x Gender x Age		.08		
Final Model: $F(7,81) = 2.91, p < .01$					Final Model: $F(7,91) = 1.53, p > .15$				

* $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

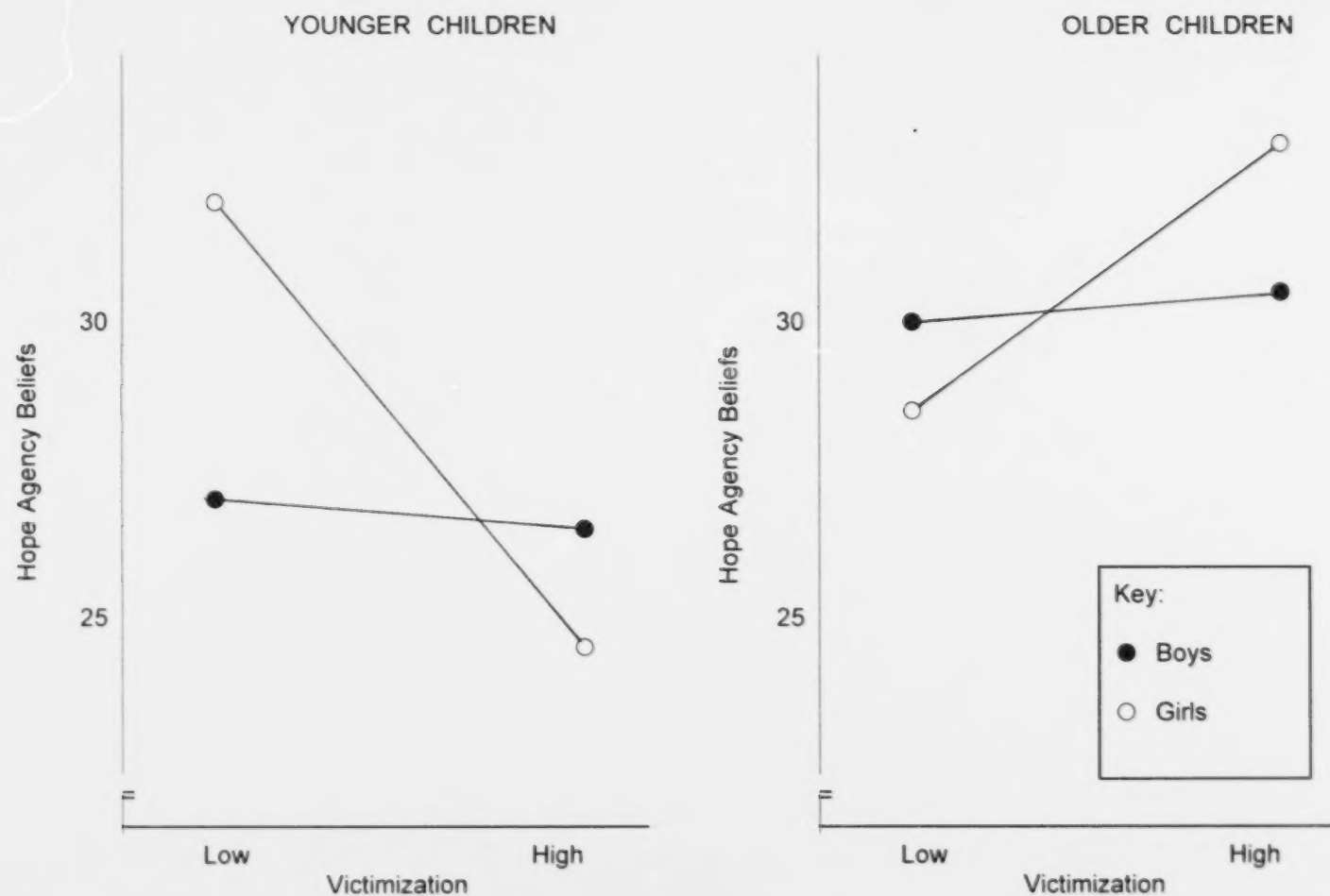


Figure 1.

Graphs of the interaction between victimization by community violence, age, and gender predicting hope agency beliefs. Higher values reflect higher levels of hope.